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ABSTRACT

It is suggested that the literature on communicative competence, replete with various formulations, mirrors the diversity of language outlined by Martin Joos in his essay "The Five Clocks." Three concepts of communicative competence are reviewed, in historical perspective. The first, promoted by Norm Chomsky, distinguished linguistic competence from linguistic performance. Dell Hymes, as with Chomsky, took a position separating that which is known from that which is experienced. The second concept of communicative competence involved the information-theory model of communication. Scholars of interpersonal communication claimed that competence could be measured in audiences and concluded that a speaker had to be competent to be believed. Those in the field of relational communication, such as John Wiemann, viewed communication competence as a performance-based concept. In Wiemann's data, the competent communicator was the metacommunicating communicator who adapted wisely to context. The third concept of communicative competence centered around speech competencies. As opposed to those researchers who have been concerned with kinds of competence, the teacher of speech communication has been concerned with what competencies the students should have at the completion of an instructional term. It is concluded that a theory of communicative competence is perhaps not as useful as a theory about the working of context. It is also suggested that the term communicative competence is only useful as it helps with specifiable educational or research goals. (HOD)

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CLEANING THREE CLOCKS OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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The question of the purpose of human life has been raised countless times; it has never yet received a satisfactory answer and perhaps does not admit of one....We will therefore turn to the less ambitious question of what men themselves show by their behavior to be the purpose and intention of their lives(Freud,1961/1930, pp. 23-24).

Martin Joos' delightfully profound essay, The Five Clocks, is a discussion of lots of different styles people speak in. Joos' pleads that we see what diversity does for us: how useful it is. If there are two clocks in the station, and if they tell different times--then isn't that why you have two of them?

But if diversity is a positive thing, what about the view that communication involves shared information, hopefully high-fidelity information? Should we reform our talk so we all sound the same--as a way to promote common understanding? Here is Joos' portrait of those who wish to reform speech and language use:

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But now if you press him for a program, he will suggest installing a master-clock system. He will promise to speak up in the next P.T.A. meeting for more and better grammar teaching, like they had in Webster's day. What he doesn't know is that he himself has two English-usage clocks as adequately adjusted as any railroad man's watch, for use on different experiences, plus three others...And he will be baffled by your lunacy if you casually say what linguists know; that he built and adjusted those clocks himself, with less help than hindrance from schooling(p. 6).

We gather at SCA to discuss communicative competence. Many of us see the primary task to be an educational one. We would like for schools to be more helpful to learners who want to maximize communicative skills and outcomes. One big part of that is developing abilities for dealing with diverse kinds of speech situations. The effective communicator tends to attend to situation.

Like Joos' clocks, the many formulations of communicative competence have rolled ceaselessly across the sand-dunes of several disciplines. This ampling imprecision has led to a problem of theoretical compatability such as that faced by computer and software manufacturers. It's hard to tell just what is behind the term when it appears, because of these confusions. The purpose of this essay is to review some concepts of competence that have caught my attention. The review does not lead to a coherent formulation of communicative competence. On the contrary, I suggest we give up that particular quest in favor of other questions. And the most important questions, I suggest, are questions involving a theory of context. Meanwhile, there are some educational tasks that many of us need to look to. I hope my remarks imply in both these directions.

That's right, no definition. There is already a nice selection. Perhaps we should use the term mainly as a promoter heuristic for applied-education markets. Still, there's been some real sharp thinking on this topic -- to browse by these findings, through three time-zones of them, is worth the excursion.

So three clocks of communicative competence are described. There could easily have been five. I only show three glops because I don't have time or face.

A Theme

A theme in the present exercise: To abstract talking from its context is a risky strategy for theorizing. I recommend trying to conceptualize speaking-in-use. In that context, sauce for the goose means exposing you to my process of investigation. Perhaps you can replicate; that seems a basis of science.

Sometimes, when you conceptualize about something for a while, you begin to see it as a colorless item, something that might just as well drift back into the worn coin of the unsayable. I'm that sort of frustrated about communicative competence. The words have pushed me, demand-ticket fashion, for a decade and a half. After this much examination the major value of a shopworn concept is to use its history as a mirror for some perhaps not too narcissistic rendering of us.

So I chased communicative competence often, and with increasing disappointment. Here are some of the whittlings and trinkets I brought back. These are three whimsically egocentric-historical renderings of parts of the competence literature. I don't think these represent that CC has three parts. Rather these are three blind persons' feels at an elephant. The elephant, competent communication, seems an interesting siamese-twin to mind, the social order that binds and ties us.

Clock 1: Communicative Chomskiscience

That reminds me of one about Communicative Competence (CC). In 1969 Fred Williams forced on me a prepublication copy of an essay he was editing for a book on poverty. The essay was called "On Communicative Competence," and it has got reprinted multipully. It has become imprinted on forebrains of numerous graduate students along with the name of its author, Dell Hymes. The essay was thick, and yielded Burkian persimmons much like these:

No normal person, and no normal community is limited to a single way of speaking, to an unchanging monotony that could preclude indication of respect, insolence, mock seriousness, humor, role distance, and intimacy by switching from one mode of speech to another.

.....

Language as such is not everywhere equivalent in role and value; speech may have different scope and functional load in the communicative economies of different societies(1972, pp. 39-40).

But to really understand what Dell Hymes is doing, it helps to begin with Chomsky.

Chomsky wrote, let there be competence and performance. He admitted that he ripped the idea off from Saussure's langue and parole, yet it was the right formulation for its time-- which was 1957, sputnik year. It parted the red sea of talk, this competence/performance distinction. Chomsky had diamond - cut talk, time magazine seemed to say. The atomism has been split, dualism is in. The paradigm walls quivered: THERE IS SOMETHING WE KNOW AND THAT IS WHY WE TALK. Chomsky says, importantly, that lots of the most interesting parts of what we know we know because our wiring has that pattern. The pattern is grammar, it is also competence, linguistic competence, which is what the ideal speaker listener would know if such a thing exists. I think it, so it exists.

Language has a head of compeetence, but feet of performance. Performance is mainly discussed in terms of our failures to be perfect. When our memory lapses, or we do a vocalized

pauses, or maybe an information - search goes awry. Performance has to be part of your theory because of only a partial resemblance between behaviors--especially communicative diversity, and idealized competence. Competence is only spoken by a hermetically sealed hypothetical communicator. Performance speaks a dialect. Competence is a completely debugged effective communicating carbon unit. The best way to describe language, then is to describe competence, and you do this by synchronic analysis, especially of syntax. The only human behaviors of real interest are intuitive judgments of informants.

Enter Dell Hymes, tall and shy-looking, talking as if reluctant to let the words go so prematurely, he informs us that culture, like language, is tightly patterned with abstract patterns. Chomsky had bragged that a perfect grammar could "generate" (nice pun) all the grammatical sentences in the language, and no ungrammatical ones. Hymes asked about this claim:

A child from whom any and all of the grammatical sentences of a language might come with equal likelihood would of course be a social monster. Within the social matrix in which it acquires also a system of its use, regarding persons, places, purposes, other modes of communication, etc., all the components of communicative events (1967, quoted by Harris).

This passage became Dell Hymes' golden oldie. Yes, a rule-oriented theory of talking had to include use, and not just grammar. But Hymes didn't want to study performance. No, he wanted to use (Margaret Mead) ethnography to study the rules behind talking. He wanted to study competence still, but this time competence with a pragmatic dimension in its grammar. This communicative competence sits next to linguistic competence in a little two-by-two matrix with the competence/performance distinction. There is a linguistic competence and a linguistic performance; a communicative competence and communicative performances. It's a swell, pan-human view, worth quoting at length, as little scholarship is. Hymes is pro-pluralism, pro-rationalism, liberal, egalitarian,

paternalistic, professorial. The vision seems very middle-class, like street drugs in the freezer: soul on ice, veneer of appreciation over center of self-control. The position has the problems of dualism; soul on ice. The position taken by Hymes, as with Chomsky, as with Plato, as with Descartes, is one of separating that which is known from that which is experienced. My own experience calls forth a theory of languageuse. Roy Harris is one linguist who mounts this reservation pointedly:

...the generativist model of linguistic competence makes it extremely difficult to link up in any plausible way our alleged knowledge of language and our ability to utilize that knowledge for communicational purposes. This difficulty arises basically because generativist theory, like structuralist theory before it, insists on driving a wedge between language and language-use. Or...it takes as axiomatic an absolute distinction between linguistic knowledge and knowledge of the world(in press, page).

Harris' position finds the conceptual heart of Saussure's theoretical stance. We must not be misled, he argues, by the difference between two ways of describing language-use (competence and performance) to pretend that these are two aspects of talking; rather they are two blind guys feeling up a self-reflexive elephant. Two perspectives do not equal systemic components. On the contrary they represent rather incomplete knowledge of what we do when we talk. We must not rest too content with eclectic modeling. In fact, we little understand our communicative actions, competent or no, except for one fact: these actions are guided by context.

To me, Harris' anti-idealistic critique seems to apply also to the work of Jurgen Habermas, who also claims to attempt a comprehensive theory of communicative competence. Habermas' goals are different from Hymes, as the views of a liberal anthropologist could be expected to differ from those of a critical theorist doing philosophy. Habermas perhaps is attempting to ground critical theory in

philosophical work about speech action. This is so critical theorists can have a place from which to wield their Archemedes' levers, and at last clean up the act of dominance-ridden humanity.

Well, Habermas observes, one thing to notice about speech is that if we argue with someone, we probably base predictions and strategies on some kind of imaginary, all-things-being equal, idealized speech situation. Responsive to this form, speakers make four kind of validity claims in the very acts of speaking: to be intelligible, true, truthful-sincere, and appropriate (Habermas, 1976, p. ; Burlson and Kline, 417). We use this idealized speech situation as a model for doing cross-checks--for evaluating communication as we go along. This process works suprisingly well unless some bad influence comes along to systematically distort it. Such bad influences as ideology and domination are of particular concern.

When we run into systematic distortion, Habermas observes, we may combat the problem by making messages increasingly abstract in attempts to transcend the problem, resolve the dispute. Habermas is always talking about disputes. He talks of little else it seems. Each move to greater abstraction (H. names 4; each transcendant of the one before) --each move is META- to the previous ones. That is, it brackets and conceptually subsumes the previous levels, and thus has some **privilege** for descriptive purposes. The top of this pyramid is apparently occupied by critical theorists. Still, this division into levels of abstraction is worth mentioning in connection with Habermas because so many recent formulations about communication emphasize this concept (for instance: Russell, Korzybski, Bateson, Pearce and Cronen).

Let us summarize an idealists garden of competence: It is a descriptive idealization about everybody. It really has nothing to say about a possibility of incompetence. It is based in a tradition of formalist, post-Saussure synchronic linguistics, which presuppose that language and use are best conceptualized independantly, though they are a monad together

in our experience. The model also seems to presuppose that all purposes of communication are informational, and humanity would best be served by a code of greatest fidelity. I could be wrong about that last one, and would appreciate response throughout this document. The bottom line is that a view of communication that separates knowledge from wisdom must be improved.

Clock 2: SPEECH acts!

Pre-meanwhile, from the teeming shore of English, sailed forth the banner of speech. These folks carried interpersonal communication with them, though they little suspected this in their writings. Perhaps these "men" did not even know that they had interpersonal relationships with their wives or students. They had heard about mass communication (which would become part of the academy on its own terms after moving to Dallas). They knew about radio and telegraph, and telephone, and from these in part, did we get Shannon's gleaning, the information-theory model of communication: one that opened the domain of talk-as-subject-for-inquiry.

Under the table was interpersonal communication. Around the table sat members of a small group convened and observed by Elwood Murray. Lester Thonnsen read psychology; Wendell Johnson read Korzybski. Lots of people read Dewey, I don't see how.

But mostly, swell men with good reasons, studied speeches and read Aristotle, and concluded that a speaker had to be COMPETENT to be believed. (Did you think I forgot the path?) In studying speeches, a problem that occurs is how can speakers to large groups of people get believed and obeyed. One of our main answers has been: show that you are competent. This is a sophistic specialty and you might guess it touches different chords than Chomskian Platonism. Speech competence is never rarefied knowledge, but more like wisdom, applied knowing.

Curiously, competence came to be measured in audiences, though the real referent remained the speaker in our theories. We learned from the social psychologists how to give a questionnaire to an audience before and after a speech. It messes up the event a bit, but you could measure this stuff. There was

hope of post-Fisherian scientific proof right here in the human sciences. It was exciting.

So we began to describe some speakers as competent, though all the information came from the audience. Its sort of like taking pictures into a mirror to study cameras.

Then there was Hitler, who puzzled us by really getting people to follow him. He discredited racism by giving it a really fair try, and by contrast with him we began to think speakers should be nice guys, which is how human relations came about. Researchers in organizations and occasionally in helping professions showed how nice guys are good listeners and help other people feel good. Gregory Bateson sparked us into relational communication, which is now a sort of field, but used to be a gleam in just a few eyes. Some of these eyes belonged to Mark Knapp, who taught Wiemann and Daly, and Art Bochner was interesting. And psychologists were giving questionnaires about stuff called interpersonal competence. And maybe there was something from Hymes or Habermas. John Wiemann has a lot of energy and reads well, so we have this concept in front of our literature called communicative competence. This is a term of the second sophistic, an effectiveness-centered term, something that some people do better than others--in fact, one of the most important things some people do better than others. And still not quite a thing. Hymesian competence brooks no incompetence, even the judgmental dope illuminates our knowledge; Wiemann's competence is a standard of performance that discards the incompetent; its spurs are effectiveness and appropriateness.

Beginning with the plato-Sophist distinction, Wiemann slides slightly on the sophist side of Aristotle:

Competence in the sense used here is not to be confused with linguistic competence. Communicative competence is a performance-based concept....Therefore it seems unwise to make the competence-performance distinction for social behavior(1977, 221)

Wiemann isolates three roots to the term communicative competence of which Hymes, though mentioned, is not one. These are: (1) a self-presentation approach, according to

which. competence implies presenting lines of action without threatening others' face; (2) a t-group approach that stresses empathy, descriptive feedback and behavioral flexibility; and (3) the social skill approach, which mostly involves Argyle's work and is the most important of the three areas. Social skills named include: affiliation, dominance, poise, rewardingness, interaction skills, perceptual sensitivity and role-taking ability.

Wiemann glued the nicest recurrent pieces of this mix together to come up with five factors that represent the communicative right stuff: (1) Affiliation and support, (2) social relaxation, (3) empathy, (4) behavioral flexibility, and (5) interaction management skills. Notice that that fifth item is different in kind from the others. Wiemann notes both its importance to the model and its meta-nature. This category involves "'procedural' aspects that structure and maintain an interaction." Examples of such procedural aspects include initiation, turn allocation, use of gaze, and other procedural issues much studied by conversational analysts in sociology and speech communication. These issues also predominateⁱⁿ discussion of ALIGNMENT TALK by me and a number of colleagues. Wiemann's model helps to focus our attention of this critical set of processes. We are close to some usable operational definitions of some of these management procedures--perhaps. Parts of meta-communication may be about to yield some secrets.

Wiemann magnifies the important status of this "interactional management skill" by making it the independent variable in his research-design--a variable measured in questionnaire form

I believe these questionnaires are the main messages studied in Wiemann's work using the term "competence" though he does more interestingly naturalistic analyses elsewhere. Anyhow, all these five aspects correlate with this interaction-management skill, and a factor analysis showed that the data are best accounted for by a single-factor solution. The single factor is essentially: EVALUATION.

In Wiemann's data, the competent communicator is the metacommunicating communicator who adapts wisely to context. This is done by taking others' lines of action into account. But how do we take context into account? What is context, that which we hope to take into account? Whatever that property might be at any time, that's what Wiemann wants to capture, and this makes the position sensibly a performance-based idealism, with what works at the god - term. Maybe.

Perhaps a third clock, it is time.

Clock 3: Competency

Around 1970 it hit me with something of a flash that there are two kinds of faculty members at prestige institutions. There are researchers (who might talk of kinds of competence) and there were teachers of communication. There were quite a few of these in business in public education and we used to make some money training these teachers. These teachers prescribed, were acting coaches for first speech, and then partly interpersonal interaction too.

If speech is an army, and if an army runs on its stomach, the teaching of communication skills as a democratic movement is our stomach. But prestige university people don't talk too often to Speech Education persons. They are unique like debate coaches, their job doesn't grow and develop, its a semi-adjunct status sometimes. Some speech education people strove to speak to both scholars and teachers. Robert Kibler and his students showed that one could think clearly about learning. Gus Friedrich, Ron Bassett, Don Cegala, Ron Allen, Ken Brown begin to appear on busy committees and to write impassioned descriptions in journals. One way to get specific and thoughtful about teaching and learning is to describe each of the goals you want to achieve--exactly what COMPETENCIES you want the student to have at the completion of a term of instruction.

Competency-based planning and evaluation began to be stressed in courses about teaching. Then came the test-constructors, especially Nancy Mead who got a lot of people together and cajoled them past their reluctance to construct evaluations.

This stream of thought melded nicely into one that Ken Allen and Ron Brown got excited about, with outputs today approaching skeletal lists of the communication skills we think every child has a right to learn in school.

This word competency is more like Wiemann's competence than like Chomsky's, but it still grows from its own roots, near the stomach, near the kitchen, near why we do this stuff. These ideas are among the most important political priorities of the decades ahead. We may be reaching a state of having more to say to state legislators and school districts about communication education.

Inspection of Allen and Brown's book shows inconsistent notions of competence popping up in different essays--due to their authorship by different authors. The best of it is in the summary chapter, which presents the stuff we talked about at the conferences. Some of the main points bear repeating:

First, there seem to be four sequential moments in the unfolding of many communication-effective actions. The competent communicator must achieve mastery at all four levels: repertoire, selection, implementation and evaluation (p. 249). Competence is not just a matter of knowing lists of things, you have to be able to select the right options and act them out effectively to be effective. To improve your effectiveness you must frequently evaluate past activities.

You cannot just have a set of rules in competence (pace Larson et al), but also somethings that account for a unitariness across these four phases.

Another fluidity in Allen and Brown's essay is that competent communicators are able to perform well within five areas of communicative function. These five kinds of intentions-and-scripts are called: controlling, feeling, informing, ritualizing and imagining. These terms have strong ancestry with the "inform, entertain, persuade" trilogy that dominate speech 101. These five functional categories have, rightly I think, served as bases for several curriculum-planning efforts. Backlund and Brown and Bassett have been busy productively here. This is an important growth market.

Clock is Struck: Conclusions

But resume your course, o my
story, for this aging monk is lingering
too long over marginalia (Eco, 1982/80, p. 25.)

We're talking about two markets, one of which looks more like a market. We're also talking about talking and about fields of inquiry. Right now, the Allen-Brown venture and the list of ~~competencies~~ ^{appear} it spills out, and the lobbying and the educating ^{appear} within our reach have we the skill and the stamina...All this matters. The nation does need more and better communication teaching, and we must carve for ourselves a bigger role in this matter than will come to our lot as a matter of heavenly routine. We ought to train some people to really market this stuff? And its not just elementary instruction; our programs don't get the play they deserve in several segments of the economy. The words "communicative competence" may be useful in this sense because its such a respectable word. But we could opt for "skill" too; which, with its gangly concreteness and wide ~~appear~~ in a back-at-basics backdrop. If we use the term this way, how much does it matter that we achieve a lot of precision in defining it. Precision of definition awaits a different use. It matters more that we present a credible model and solidly developed sets of procedures. For the present, let us present ourseves, not concretize definitions.

The first two clocks remain, with sprinklings of the third, for philosopher-kings to consider. I don't prefer one of the two, but look forward to subsuming ^{them} both into some theoretical model that meets important objections. The idealistic model is etherial and elitist; it is conceptual error to separate language-use, regardless of the move's analytical power. On the other hand, the competence-incompetence view just creates a more content-free ideal, that of effectiveness.

Perhaps we can begin to state where the competences meet; though the place is not really one well-served by present treatments, such as McCroskey's which emphasize

differences in definition, and argues/^{only} for clarification of present distinctions. What do both competences have in common?

Both are idealizations, though one idealizes linguistic formalism and one idealizes cultural effect. However, since neither concept is possible without effective performances both positions must base idealism in pragmatism somehow.

Neither form of competence can mount an explanation of interpersonal communication that is any better than the theory of context which can be embedded into it. Both Hymes and Wiemann stress that the^{ir} theory is about adaptation to context. Both text and con-text must be accounted for in the same model. Must such a model be a model of competence? I don't see that it does?

Both formulations of competence note that messaging varies in level of abstraction. There may even exist discrete subsystems of message (and message-interpretation) that are interestingly described using a term like "level of abstraction" (see Habermas, Pearce and Cronen, Frentz and Farrell, Wittgenstein, Russell, Korzybski).

Meaning, something reflexively emergent across time, seems to be a property of competence, however formulated. Situations change, often abruptly and conceptually. Changes get re-changed, messages get changed again sometimes long after they happen. We are retrospective and prospective animals, imaginary fantasyland time-travellers.

Since there are indeterminant incomplete aspects to messaging, TFGs, the most effective ways of communication do not always show a preference for maximum message fidelity. Rather, an effective way to communicate usually involves dialog.

Communicative action-in-context is lots like other action. Its major importance is that it is used in meta-action and even guidance of action. Communication involves a self in cybernetic self-regulation; a process of controlling one's own controls.

Finally, all definitions of competence seem to imply a developmental emphasis. Both Chomskian and Hymnian models are frequently cited as rationale for studies of communicative development. Young children are now credited with richer stores of competence than was formerly the case. Johnson (1983) for example, illustrates the argument that young infants can be considered as mature skill-users in their own right. These developmental studies suggest more of a steward-of-natural-development role for teachers.

Such thinking also leads us to take a long hard look at school activities, and to label some as useless, others as elitist. Educators are now responsible for asking some very difficult and value-laden questions: what are the most important aspects of communication skill? How alike does everyone need to talk in order to trade services and build relationships? There are few obvious answers emerging, but the long hard look is leading to one general conclusion: Most/many of the things that have been taught the hardest, such as prescriptive grammar, have questiona^{ble} value-bases and questionable instructional impact.

I suggest that this line of research has led to the questioning of speech differences between groups. A side-spur of this inquiry is probably the study of speech differences between women and men. Recent findings in this area suggest that such differences are largely in our heads, not rolling off our tongues. Other findings about diversity between dialects yield similar findings--so-called Black English

is distinguished from caucasian variants by a scant dozen features. There's no chance this causes communication difficulties. The difficulties stem from racism, a syndrome most members of most races seem to suffer with. In short, it is argued that research in communicative competence has shown us the feet of clay in our approaches to discourse, by asking fact-centered descriptive questions about how people get things done through talking. Answering such questions remains an urgent priority--far more urgent than trying to arrive at a good definition for CC.

Further exemplification of our feet of clay: researchers in communicative competence have begun to discover, along with others, that humans tend to attend to face-status aspects of situations (Harre, Brown and Levinson, Goffman) rather more than seems productive. It is part of our job to begin to prescribe remedies to this bias--if we can figure out cleanly how it operates.

In sum, I get two sets of implication from the present review: educational ones and scholarly ones. The educational implication is that we should continue to lobby and educate, and when a global term CC will be useful in these efforts, let us use it. But let us not use it to hide from the serious value questions that face educators today. Most of what we used to think was competent communication just thirty years ago turns out to be bourgeois good-manners and protection of face for self-and-other. Lets keep asking the most fundamental instructional questions and backing this up with particularized program material.

The research enterprise should mainly aim to support the teaching enterprise by asking clear descriptive questions about the nature of human communication and how it works. I favor naturalistic approaches in this endeavor--approaches in which our data stick as close to the details of messages as possible. Questionnaires give us numbers quicker, but naturalism gives numbers eventually; you get what you pay for.

One problem is the relativism of everything. How can one claim today to even prove one's own existence? Descartes thought he could prove existence by demonstrating the presence of an action--that of thinking. Numerous recent thinkers (eg Bergmann, Rorty) do a similar thing with talking. Rather than claiming to study realities, these people study words. According to the "linguistic turn" one studies *x* by studying the word "*x*" and related words. This study is doubly exciting given our access to tape recorders--for the first time, detailed and factor records of speech are available easily and cheaply. I am trying to build a library of such materials, and hope you will help me in this venture.

All these research concerns point toward needing some theory to rest in. A theory of CC? Perhaps, but certainly a theory about the workings of CONTEXT. Except as the term CC helps us with specifiable educational or research goals, I don't need to hear about it.

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*I hope I've assembled (hastily) all sources actually cited. Names mentioned often imply particular works, and I'll be glad to be pinned down about these upon request.